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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001095

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI WARNS OF LONG-TERM IRANIAN
INTENTIONS FOR LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) March 14 and Sunni leader Saad Hariri, back from an extended stay abroad, expressed his concerns about the new French government's Lebanon policy, Iran's long-term intentions in Lebanon (with General Michel Aoun's active participation), and the need for a tougher US policy on Syria. Hariri was upbeat about March 14's prospects in the August 5 parliamentary by-elections following a deal with Michel Murr, who promised to deliver the deal-breaking Armenian vote to March 14's candidate in the critical Metn district. End summary.

¶2. (C) Back from Saudi Arabia, a relaxed and cigar-smoking Hariri received the Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, at his residence in Qoreitem on July 23. Hariri press officer Nadine Chehab also attended as notetaker.

WARY ABOUT FRENCH

¶3. (C) Hariri said French Special Envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran's recent trip to Syria was "not good," though he acknowledged that Sarkozy kept his promise to send a tough message, threatening Damascus with sanctions if it continued to interfere in Lebanon. Although he agreed with the Ambassador that the "foundations" are there (i.e., French support for the Special Tribunal), Hariri said he was not entirely confident about Sarkozy's Lebanon policy and urged the US to "work on France." (Comment. The feeling is mutual; the Ambassador heard from French Ambassador Bernard Emie that Sarkozy found Hariri lacking in imagination during their recent meeting in Paris. End comment.)

¶4. (C) In Saudi Arabia, Cousseran reportedly also received a clear message on Syria. Like the Saudis before them, Hariri agreed, the French are trying to corner Syria through Iran. The only significant outcome of the July 14-15 St. Cloud meetings was that "Hizballah went to Paris."

IRAN'S LONG-TERM STRATEGY

¶5. (C) Hariri dismissed the idea that Iran, which wants to

avoid disorder, and Syria, whose primary goal is to destabilize Lebanon in order to take back control, are at odds with each other. Syria cannot do any "big" things without Hizballah's knowledge and without protecting Hizballah's interests, he explained. "Like killing MPs?" the Ambassador interjected. "Like Nahr al-Barid," Hariri replied without missing a beat. Asked by the Ambassador whether Hizballah views a Sunni-Shia clash as a redline, Hariri said the potential for such a clash is being downplayed.

¶6. (C) Hizballah and Iran have a "ten-year plan," Hariri explained. First, they will argue that the inability of the Lebanese to form a national unity government and elect a new president creates a void that can only be filled by changing the Ta'if accord to give the Sunnis, Shia, and Christians each one-third of the parliamentary seats. Iran, which was not a party to Ta'if, wants to have a voice, Hariri said, and its goal is for a Shia to eventually become prime minister (a position currently reserved for a Sunni under the Ta'if agreement) by siding with the Christians against the Sunnis. Hariri warned that changing Ta'if is "the only thing that would start a new civil war in Lebanon." The one-third for each group would work if Lebanon were a neutral country like Switzerland, with no arms, he added wistfully.

¶7. (C) After the premiership, the Iranians' next target is the presidency, Hariri continued, completing Lebanon's transformation into a Shia-dominated country and fulfilling Iran's goals of creating a Shia crescent from Tehran to the Mediterranean. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia would be next, he predicted.

AOUN'S AGENDA

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¶8. (C) Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is an active participant in Iran's strategy, Hariri continued; even though the Christians would see their parliamentary seats reduced from 50 percent to one-third, Aoun would achieve his goal of becoming president. Hariri confirmed March 14 was talking with its Christian allies to counter Aoun's ambitions, and that he had postponed his own (ill-conceived, in our opinion) meeting with Aoun until after the August 5 parliamentary by-elections.

¶9. (C) Mohamad Chatah, Senior Advisor to PM Siniora, is working with Hariri's cousin and advisor Nader to prepare an agenda for the meeting, which Hariri said included four main issues: 1) Hariri would not "close the door" on an Aoun presidency; 2) Lebanon/Syria relations and the need to resume the national dialogue; 3) disarming Palestinian militias; and 4) the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as the sole legitimate source of security for Lebanon. If Aoun agrees with these points, Hariri said, it will be a "hard punch to Hizballah."

¶10. (C) Hariri said Michel Murr had suggested to him that a two-year presidency would help fill the void created by the failure to form a national unity government. However, a two-year president would still need a two-thirds majority to get elected, Hariri pointed out.

STICKS AND STONES NEEDED FOR SYRIA

¶11. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's question regarding Syria's intentions in Lebanon, Hariri replied without hesitation, "Stop the Tribunal." Of course, he added, Syria is part of the larger Iranian power struggle in the region and expects to get its share of the spoils, noting that immediately after Cousseran's trip to Damascus, Iranian President Ahmadjinejad met with Syrian President Asad.

¶12. (C) The Saudis currently are working on a policy paper for a strategy (septel) for the next few months, he reported,

and will take tough steps on cornering Syria. Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Khoja, also is doing a great job, he added.

¶13. (C) The US also needs a stronger policy on Syria, Hariri argued; isolation is not enough. "You didn't talk to Arafat and look where that got you," he said, whereas the tough US policy on Iran has brought everyone else on board. We both know that sooner or later Syria had something to do with UNIFIL, he added, referencing the June 24 attack that killed six Spanish peacekeepers. The Syrians aren't afraid of anyone anymore, now that the Europeans are flocking to Damascus in droves and the US is willing to talk to them about Iraq. Meanwhile, all the US is doing is sending tough messages, when more forceful action is needed. "Sanction the hell out of them, or something," he urged. If we want presidential elections in Lebanon, we need to scare the Syrians. And the only real threat is the Special Tribunal, he stressed again, adding that we need to make progress on the Tribunal and nomination of the Prosecutor General.

UPBEAT ON BY-ELECTIONS

¶14. (C) Hariri was confident of March 14 victories in the two August 5 parliamentary by-elections in Beirut in Metn. For the Beirut seat, it was important for March 14 to win by a large percentage. In Metn, Hariri said, "the Murrs (Defense Minister Elias and father Michel) will give (Amine) Gemayel to me," referring to a short-lived deal (septel) under which Michel would deliver the Tashnaq votes to ensure that Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's candidate, Dr. Camille Khoury, would lose by at least 20,000 votes, thereby crushing any hopes Aoun had for the presidency. (Note. The deal was dead only a few hours later after March 14 member Gabriel Murr, Elias' not so beloved brother, trashed Elias on Hariri's Future TV, thereby destroying any incentives Elias had to help March 14 in Metn. But, knowing the Murrs, we would expect they will try to use this incident to extract some kind of price out of March 14 that, if accepted by March 14, might induce the Murrs to switch sides once again. End note.)

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